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A STUDY OF THE FORM AND CONTENTS OF THE SONG OF SONGS.

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Most writers on the Song discover in it not only an elaborate plot, but a complicated dramatic structure, and it is customary to divide the poem into as many as five distinct acts. Aside from the simple naïve character of the book itself, this seems a theory unwarranted by what we know of the literary art of Israel and other nations of antiquity. It must be remembered that the date of this book is somewhere in the tenth or eleventh centuries B. C., and that the Greek drama did not attain its full development until six centuries later (*circ.* 480 B. C.) We do not find in Old Testament literature any strong action and reaction of characters. There is much, it is true, that is exceedingly dramatic in the history, the prophets and the poetry of the Bible, but the balancing of one character against another, and the elaboration of situations as such, is almost altogether wanting.

The human soul is the stage upon which emotions play, and it is to a large degree by the unveiling of the heart itself that we get what is called the dramatic element of Scripture. The book of Esther in some respects comes nearer the requirements of the drama than any other portion of the Old Testament; its transitions are startling and full of surprises, and the denouement is tragic and powerful. Yet we are justified in regarding it merely as a piece of vivid historical writing, for which the actual events supplied all the dramatic material needed.

Isaiah's description of the descent of the king of Babel into Sheol (Isa. 14) and Ezekiel's picture of the slain multitudes of Pharaoh, Elam, Meshech and Edom (Ezek. 32: 17 ff.) are vivid portrayals, dramatic even in their vividness, but after all they

are pictures, tremendous pieces of word-painting, and they would find their places in an epic of Hades rather than in a drama. The Book of Job is often considered a drama, but if it is, the action is almost entirely in Job's own soul. The friends add to his perplexities, but they do not aid in his final victory; they drop out of sight altogether at the end, and it is Job and Jehovah who are left standing alone. Job towers above all his Comforters, and they are seen to be hardly more than the personifications of effete or perverted ideas of Divine justice and government.

Can we now apply the same course of reasoning to the book before us? In the first place, it must be admitted that there are certain well-defined dramatic features and a dramatic setting, then, Solomon and the Shulamite stand out very clearly as the protagonists, and again, a chorus, consisting of the daughters of Jerusalem, is an integral part of the poem. Yet it is quite obvious that it is the Shulamite around whom everything revolves. Her sentiments, her longings, her doubts and her triumph form the central theme of the whole book. There is really very little that can be called dialogue, for the speakers express their thoughts without much effort, seemingly, to impress one another with their force. The passages in which Solomon addresses the Shulamite as "my friend" are studied and rhetorical, and more like declamations than appeals to one whom he seeks to win. The Shulamite hardly ever seems to reply to him directly; almost all her utterances, until the last chapter, are more in the nature of soliloquies or reveries than of conversations. They are rather the expressions of one whose soul is troubled and struggling, and whose gaze is turned inward than of one who is responding to fervid appeals or even seeking to parry too fulsome compliments. Observe that in chapters 3 and 5 the action is carried on in the visions of the night, the beloved is sought each time not in waking reality, but in dreams. Notice also that in chapter 2:8 we have undoubtedly a reminiscence of a past event, and the conversation, charming and natural as it is, is unquestionably a memory over which the Shulamite muses to herself. In chap. 6:10 the description seems to relate to the first discovery of the

Shulamite by Solomon and his court,—another reminiscence, of which, however, more will be said later.

If these observations be correct, the Shepherd Lover, whom so many regard as a third and leading character and the rival of Solomon, is a shadow projected upon the canvas before which the other characters move, rather than an actual, present entity. He is, however, none the less real in his influence, for he is the cause of the whole action on the Shulamite's part. But a drama in which one of the most important actors is made to play his part in dream or revery alone, differs very widely from the drama as ordinarily understood; it stamps the book at once with a strongly subjective character. As a study in literary history it would, however, be an exceedingly interesting question to determine whether this subjective element developed the necessity for the chorus as we see it in the Greek drama.

Let us now consider the contents of the book somewhat in detail.

Chaps. 1:2–2:7 seem to be a scene laid either in the palace at Jerusalem, or as some think in the tents of the king, who is making a royal progress through Northern Palestine. This latter supposition I do not, however, regard as likely, for the vision in chapter 3 is colored by the new sights and experiences of the city.

In the opening verses the daughters of Jerusalem are heard singing a choral passage in praise of Solomon. There are indications that the song was partly by a chorus and partly by individual singers. It is possible that the Shulamite herself utters the words, "The king brought me into his apartments." Although the passage in parts undoubtedly refers to the king, it certainly seems as if other parts were addressed to the Shulamite, particularly the last words of verse 4: "We will exult and rejoice in thee, we will make mention of thy love more than wine, rightly do they love thee." The pointing of the suffixes is against this, and perhaps it should not be pressed. The Shulamite responds in words which are half deprecating and half a soliloquy, "I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem." And almost immediately the king enters, and addresses her in courtly phrases, likening her to a steed in Pharaoh's

chariots. The Shulamite does not reply directly; she speaks of her Beloved in the third person. Solomon addresses her again, "Behold, thou art fair, my friend; behold, thou art fair, thine eyes are doves." The Shulamite in verses 16, 17, and again in 2:3-6 appears to reply directly to the king's words and almost to reciprocate his advances as she does nowhere else. May we not suppose that, surrounded as she is by all the glory and magnificence of the court, she falters for the moment? Her personal vanity is appealed to, and though she deprecates Solomon's praise by saying that she is not one of the exotics of the court, but simply a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valley, when he responds by declaring that she is incomparably above her surroundings, past and present,—“As a lily among thorns, so is my friend among the daughters,”—she seems to accept the preëminence accorded her; yet she says, “As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons; in his shadow I took delight; I sat down and his fruit was pleasant to my taste” (2:3), and thus claims for the one whom she continually speaks of in the third person as “My Beloved” a like preëminence, as though arguing his case in the presence of the shadow of a doubt as to whether he stood so high after all as she had always fondly pictured him. But when without an apparent change of subject she exclaims, “He has brought me into the house of wine, and his banner over me is love,” (2:4) she can hardly refer to any one else than the king, the two rivals are contrasted for the instant and weighed the one over against the other. In the next sentence the subject is changed again, “Stay ye me with raisins, comfort ye me with apples, for I am sick of love” (2:5). The daughters of Jerusalem are appealed to here, and as a continuation of the appeal, though not to them, I take the verb of the next verse to be in the passive, “Let his left hand be under my head” (2:6). The temptation has been strong, and the inexperienced maiden has perhaps been shaken by it, for she has been plied with the subtle flattery that she is superior to her environment. Yet, in the midst of it all, she cries out with the strongest negative that a Hebrew could use, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes and by

the hinds of the fields, that ye stir not up nor awaken love until it please" (2:7). Literally, "If ye stir up love," with the suppressed conclusion, "may God do so to you and more also," and she thus seems to recognize in the daughters of Jerusalem one of the most potent instruments of her trial.

In chap. 2:8 the atmosphere of the whole scene suddenly changes; the Shulamite hears the voice of her Beloved, she sees him looking in at the windows, glancing through the lattice. Yet all this is but a subjective appearance; she has not left the royal apartments; she is still in the court, though she is probably alone; but her thoughts at once revert to other times and other themes. Just as in the first chapter everything seemed to breathe the highly perfumed air of an oriental court, so here we smell all the odors of the springtime and hear the songs of countless birds. But we do not have two speakers as before. The Shulamite, in her revery, pictures before her mind the form of her beloved and recalls his words; she repeats them over to herself and then breaks out into a little snatch of song, just as she had often done in the vineyards,—*"Take us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom"* (2:15). Then she pledges herself anew to her beloved and prays him to hasten over the mountains of separation. From this waking vision we pass naturally to a vision of the night, in which the Shulamite seeks her Beloved through the streets of the strange city, which must have impressed itself strongly upon her imagination with its new and unaccustomed sights. When she has once found him whom her soul loved, she steps, by a touch of the truest art, from the city streets directly into her mother's house in the far north, she wakes in the strength of the vision to adjure the daughters of Jerusalem anew not to attempt to coerce a love which must be spontaneous, and with this closes what I consider the first act. The daughters of Jerusalem have been the most prominent figures; by their praise of the king and the supreme excellence of his love, they have sought to show the Shulamite the greatness of her privilege in being brought to court, while Solomon himself has sought to move her by telling her how far superior she is to anyone around her. But to all

this she opposes the simple fact that she is her Beloved's, and that her affection can only be given spontaneously.

With chap. 3 : 6 begins a new section, "Who is this that cometh up out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke," and we have a brilliant piece of word-painting; the royal retinue is seen approaching Jerusalem, and Solomon in all his glory, in his kingly array, with his golden crown upon his head, is pictured before us. His own overpowering personality is now to be brought to bear on the Shulamite, and as he stands before her we hear again his courtly compliments. They are studied and rhetorical, nothing effective is omitted, but they remind us of what he first said, when he compared her to a steed in Pharaoh's chariots; they are a catalogue of good points rather than the outburst of an impassioned love. He seems not to succeed so well now as on the former occasion, for with the words, "Until the day be cool and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, to the hill of frankincense" (4 : 6); the Shulamite apparently seeks the quiet of the palace gardens, while Solomon, after one more word, leaves her for a season. Alone with her own thoughts, she communes again in soul with the absent beloved. In her revery in the garden she almost unconsciously contrasts the studied and finished compliments of Solomon with the fresh, unstudied and natural outburst of the beloved. The call that is wafted to her from the north is but the echo of her own longings,—*"With me from Lebanon, O Bride, with me from Lebanon come; look from the top of Amana, from the top of Senir and Hermon, from the lions' dens, from the mountains of the leopards."*
"Thou art a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters and flowing streams from Lebanon" (4 : 8, 15),—and she responds with the words, *"Awake, O north wind"* (4 : 16).

It would be almost impossible to understand chap. 5 : 1 of the beloved Shepherd if he were present in bodily form, for how could he be conceived of as having really gained an entrance to the palace as the verse seems to imply? But if we look upon the verse as forming the transition from the waking revery in the garden to the actual dream introduced in verse 2, the difficulty

vanishes. The dream that follows is more vivid than the first, and painful as the first was not. In the first she sought and found her Beloved ; in the second she loses him and is subjected to indignity. This dream is psychologically as true to nature as the other. The Shulamite is conscious enough of her personality to hesitate to admit her Beloved, and yet there rushes over her the sense that he is here at last, and perhaps about to be lost forever, and she hurries forth into the dark streets to bring him back. Incidentally this scene strengthens the shepherd theory, for the dream is just what we should expect when the difficulties had become extreme and escape seemed impossible, the anguish of mind and the hopelessness of the situation would force themselves even through the bars of sleep. Are we to suppose that she awakes now full of terror and agony of soul? Perhaps so, but one is almost inclined to carry the dream further and to see in the appearance of the Daughters of Jerusalem but a continuation of it ; certainly their sympathy and willingness to search for the Beloved seems a little strange for such devoted admirers of Solomon, but as the vagary of a dream it would be natural enough.

It is also to be noticed that the Shulamite's description of her Beloved is not in the simple language which she otherwise always uses, but is grandiloquent and strained, like the speeches we sometimes make in dreams. Yet the act closes with the words which are the renewal of her pledge, "I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine" (6:3).

The third act is introduced with less pomp and circumstance than the others. Solomon speaks again, and while he uses in part the same words as before, he is briefer than in the second act. On each previous appearance he has said, "Thou art fair, my friend." Now he says, "Thou art fair, my friend, as Tirzah" (6:4). On each of the former occasions he has compared her eyes to doves. Now he says they are terrible. "Turn away thine eyes from me," he exclaims, "for they have overcome me" (6:5). Verses 5^b-7 are a repetition of chap. 4:1^b, 2 and 3^b. It is certainly remarkable that in a book where there is so much variety, the speech put into the mouth of one of the leading

characters should be so stereotyped. It reminds one strongly of the Book of Job, where the three-fold assault upon Job's position diminishes in effectiveness each time, little indeed being added after the first cycle, and at last dies away in a few phrases, which have but little bearing upon the main point of the controversy. And just as words failed the friends of Job, so Solomon's speech seems to halt and his fluency and rhetoric to desert him.

The last trial is apparently less severe than either of the others, but let us look a little closer. The scene seems to be laid in the interior of the palace. The harem is, as it were, for a moment unveiled, and in 6:8, 9 its inmates are mentioned. As the Shulamite stands in their midst, she seems to hear the whisper of the Beloved, "There are three-score queens and four-score concubines, and virgins without number; my dove, my undefiled is but one" (6:8), but with this whisper the temptation itself may be intensified; she is the only one in the eyes of the Beloved, but she could so easily be supreme here, "the daughters saw her and called her blessed; yea, the queens and concubines, and they praised her" (6:9), and with these thoughts her memory reverts to the time before she had enjoyed this taste of royal luxury, and she seems to see again Solomon's retinue as it suddenly came upon her in her native valley, and to hear the exclamation, "Who is this that looketh forth as the morning" (6:10); she remembers how she sought to escape from the chariots of her princely people, and how they called after her, "Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon thee" (6:13^a), and how she turned back with the deprecating appeal, "Why do ye look upon the Shulamite as ye would upon a dance of Mahanaim" (6:13^b). If her beauty so wrought upon them when she was but an unknown rustic maiden, what limit need she set to her power? The memory of the past is the more vivid in that she is again the center of observation and admiration. The real *crux* of the whole book is chap. 7:1-5, beginning, "How beautiful are thy feet in sandals, O prince's daughter." Almost all commentators seem certain that this describes a dancer, and if the verses be not an interpolation, as W. R. Smith, in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, suggests, they must

refer to the Shulamite. Yet it is difficult to conceive of her as engaging in a voluptuous oriental dance, even before the court ladies. May not the following suggestion be helpful: Let chap. 7:1-5 be connected closely in thought with 6:9—"The daughters saw her and called her blessed"—and interpreted as the words with which the daughters praise her as she stands in their midst. Is there then anything that necessarily compels us to assume that she dances in their presence? Their praise is fulsome, and as they pass from one grace of her person to another there flashes through her mind the recollection of those first admiring exclamations which have already been commented on. I strongly incline to the view that 6:10-13 in the English, contains the thoughts which are passing through the Shulamite's mind simultaneously with the praise which the queens and concubines are showering upon her in 7:1-5. When we come to the words (verse 5) "A king held captive in the tresses," we discover the animus of the whole passage—they are the final effort of the court to move her by appealing to her vanity and love of power. Solomon himself also makes one last attempt to shake her resolution. But she is strong now, and in verses 9^b-10 she reiterates her devotion to her Beloved and her trials are ended. We see her next going forth with her Beloved and conversing with him. It is no revery this time, but a genuine reunion; it is not a vision, but a reality. Yet just as she had addressed the Daughters of Jerusalem after each vision with an adjuration, so here she addresses them again in almost the same words—only a slight note of scorn is introduced, "What reason have you in striving to stir up, to awaken love before it pleases" (8:4). It is in the concluding passages that the strongest arguments for the Shepherd Lover may be found. The suffixes in 8:5 are all masculine. "Under the apple tree I awakened *thee*" (masculine), indicating that the Shulamite is the speaker, a fact which seems fatal to the theory that Solomon is the Beloved, for he was not born in the north where this scene is evidently laid. Delitzsch seeks to break the force of the

argument by changing the pointing and reading the suffixes as feminine.

Again, verse 7, the Shulamite says, "If a man were to give all the substance of his house for love he would be utterly condemned." The Shulamite had been plied with the temptation of wealth and had overcome it.

Chapter 8 : 8, 9, which, like so many other passages, is introduced abruptly, finds its justification in verse 10. She recalls the words she had heard her brothers use, and in her triumph recognizes that she has fulfilled all their desires. "I was a wall," she exclaimed, "worthy of the turret of silver, the allurements of the court were of no avail."

Then again (verse 12), "My vineyard, which is mine, is before me, thou, O Solomon, shalt have the thousand, and those that keep the fruit thereof, two hundred. Solomon is welcome to all his glory and his riches, if he will but leave me free to do what I will with mine own."

At last we hear the voice of the Beloved himself, asking to hear her voice, just as she had told of his doing in the first act, and she responds in words like those of 2 : 17, "Make haste, my Beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices."

As a final argument for the introduction of a third character—the shepherd—may be urged the fact that, in that case, the climax comes naturally in the last chapter, the reunion with the Beloved. While according to Delitzsch's theory, at least, the climax is reached in the third chapter, where he supposes Solomon to marry the Shulamite, which makes the rest of the book read like an anticlimax.

To sum up briefly, there may be found in the book three main divisions or acts, 1 : 2—3 : 5 ; 3 : 6—6 : 3 ; 6 : 4—8 : 14.

Act I. has three well-marked scenes ; first, a dialogue between Solomon and the Shulamite, with the daughters of Jerusalem as a chorus ; second, a reminiscence in a revery of the shepherd lover ; and third, a dream in which the Beloved is sought and found. The act ends with the words "I adjure you."

Act II. likewise has three scenes ; first, Solomon addresses

the Shulamite, who seeks to avoid his compliments ; second, a revery in which the Beloved appears before her mind only ; and third, a dream in which the Beloved is lost, and in which the Daughters of Jerusalem appear to console her.

Act III. possesses three clearly-marked scenes : Solomon again addresses the Shulamite ; she recalls the incidents of her meeting with Solomon's train, and finally rejects him ; she then rejoins her Beloved, with whom she returns to northern Palestine.

Each act is introduced by the appearance of Solomon. A dream in which the Beloved is sought forms the concluding subject of the first and second acts, while the third act closes with the actual reunion with the Beloved. Each act, too, presents its own peculiar phase of temptation. The appeal to vanity, the glory of Solomon's personality, the love of power. But the fact that the book deals so largely with the play of emotions in the human heart makes it unlikely that it was ever composed for scenic representation.

A word or two concerning the interpretation. It is always best to put foremost the literal meaning, it is so easy to allegorize that we ought to lay some constraint upon ourselves in dealing with this book. But we need have no difficulty in presenting a clear-cut subject for the song on the simple literal theory. We see before us a soul assailed by the temptations of earthly honor and position, nevertheless retaining its integrity and fidelity. The book depicts the triumph of tried virtue, a subject by no means unworthy of the pen of inspiration. On this view it takes its place in the wisdom literature alongside of Ecclesiastes and Job.

Nevertheless there may be some shadow of right in the claims of the typical theory, provided they are not pressed too far. Marriage is so frequently in the Old and New Testament a type of the connection of God and his people, that in a book where the marriage relation and fidelity to it are so prominent, we can hardly avoid seeing, in the final outcome, an illustration of something higher. One thought in particular has grown out of this study. This little book is the record of a struggle and a victory, one temptation and trial follows another, but at last,

when all is over, there rises clear and sweet, like the notes of a soprano, the song of victory and peace, "Make haste, my Beloved, and be like to a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of spices."

There is a similar picture in the New Testament, the similarity of which must, however, be felt rather than reasoned out. In the last chapter of the Revelation, after all the struggle and turmoil and seeming defeat, there comes a period of rest, the clouds roll away, the sound of war and tumult cease and the Church triumphant emerges from the smoke of the conflict, faithful through all to the Lamb who has redeemed her. And then are heard again those clear bell-like notes, incomparably sweet and thrilling—"The Spirit and the Bride say come, and he that is athirst let him come . . . he that testifieth these things saith, yea, I come quickly. Amen, come Lord Jesus."

Are we not justified in using this little book to illustrate the longing of the Church for an absent Lord, and her faithfulness to him through every trial and temptation?